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Hands Off the Baltics

The failure of Mikhail Gorbachev's scare tactics to deflect Lithuanian independence is taken by the Bush administration as vindication of its hands-off policy. But without pressure from Washington, will the Kremlin succeed next time?

That is the concern in Vilnius, where newly elected Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis, acting with the calm dignity that has ennobled the Baltic independence drive, said no to Gorbachev's terse command to "report in three days' time" to Moscow that independence is "illegitimate." Provocative military maneuvers and sudden "repairs" that cut telephone lines communicating to the West failed to frighten the Lithuanians.

Although President Gorbachev's first effort to defeat the most serious breakaway ever attempted against the Soviet Union failed, he has many other tactics up his sleeve. Whether they succeed is seen in Lithuania as depending on the Americans. In refusing to be cowed,

Landsbergis focused the future squarely on Washington by asking the West for "an important sign of political and moral support": recognition of independent Lithuania.

But high-level administration meetings on what President Bush should do are not encouraging for Vilnius. "Sticking our thumb in [Gorbachev's] eye could be counterproductive," one policy-maker told us.

That defines a U.S. policy that says this: The Baltics are doing just fine without any help from Washington. Flatly ruled out for now is U.S. diplomatic recognition, partly on grounds that the United States does not recognize a government unless it has substantial "control" of its own territory (though Washington recognized the Chinese Nationalist regime for 33 years after Chiang Kai-shek was driven from the mainland). Given the pervasive Soviet military presence throughout the Baltics, recognition would be unattainable if the control standard held.

Instead, the United States contemplates more whispered White House calls for freedom and democracy in the Baltics, eschewing the no-no word "independence." How then do the Baltics get their freedom? They must work it out with Moscow.

In Vilnius, such advice wears thin, considering all the advantages a hands-off policy gives Gorbachev. He can count on relative quiet from Washington while he experiments with ways to prevent that small Nordic slice of northern Europe, the Baltics, from escaping the Soviet Union. His first move failed. The next one might work. If not that, then the next one. What Gorbachev has proved above all during the past five years is his tactical genius to get from here to there.

For example, if new military provocation evokes demonstrations in Vilnius, Moscow could decide to assign troops to "preserve peace" and "prevent violence." That probably would be unacceptable to the Bush administra-

tion, but Landsbergis and his new government have not been told so in clear language. Nor can they gauge U.S. reaction if Moscow applies economic pressure—cutting off electric power or denying manufacturing parts and causing massive unemployment.

When we interviewed Landsbergis in Vilnius late last month, he said he was surprised that "the Western powers do not fully realize that the Soviets have not won the 'Third World War'—for economic wealth, domestic harmony and a secure place in the world—they have lost it." Sitting in the small, spare office that was then the headquarters of the Sąjūdis independence movement, the musicologist elected last week as president of free Lithuania was puzzled, perhaps upset, by Washington's tender concern over Gorbachev.

Before the "Third World War" ends, Landsbergis added, it is highly likely that Gorbachev will have to give up control of the Baltic states, just as he had to give up his entire Eastern Euro-

pean empire. Nevertheless, he said, "the United States talks with Mr. Gorbachev as though he were an equal."

Even more pointed about American policy was Algirdas Brazauskas, first secretary of the Lithuania Communist Party but just named a deputy prime minister in the new government as a latecomer to the independence movement. "We would like the United States to take a more concrete and definitive position," he told us in his office in the new parliament building in Vilnius. "The United States is being evasive."

The argument against evasion was seen on Sunday, when tens of thousands of pro-Moscow Russians who live in Lithuania staged a rally to protest independence. If intimidation like that gets worse, the United States might have to face what it plainly regards as an odious policy shift: a tougher pro-independence policy, sending a credible warning to Moscow and a promise to Vilnius.

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